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SB 144

**Testimony to the Montana House Fish, Wildlife and Parks Committee
by Jonathan Proctor, Defenders of Wildlife**

March 17, 2011

Mr. Chairman, members of the committee. My name is Jonathan Proctor. I live in Missoula and work for Defenders of Wildlife, a conservation organization with more than one million members and supporters, including 3,900 in Montana. We have been working on wildlife conservation in Montana – including bison conservation – for over 30 years. Specifically, we have been working with the wildlife agencies of Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservations on their efforts to expand and fence their bison reserves, and to receive genetically pure disease-free Yellowstone bison.

We oppose Senate Bill 144. Two years ago many of us were in this same committee to testify against essentially the same bill. This committee chose to table it then, and we urge you to do the same now for the following reasons.

SB 144 would prevent translocation of the quarantined disease-free Yellowstone bison. This would likely force their slaughter, an unconscionable act after the tremendous effort and expense to provide brucellosis-free and genetically important Yellowstone bison to start new herds elsewhere.

SB 144 is unfair to tribes who wish to restore these bison to tribal lands. Fort Peck Fish and Game submitted a plan over two years ago to receive quarantined Yellowstone bison. They have prepared and fenced a bison reserve on tribal land at great expense. Fort Belknap is moving forward on similar plans. Not only would this bill stop their bison plans dead in their tracks, it would also specifically insult all of Montana's tribes by requiring the secretary of state to send all tribal governments a copy of this act, just to make sure they get the message that the Montana legislature is overriding their interest in restoring bison to their reservations.

SB 144 is in large part about a lack of trust in the ability of tribal wildlife agencies to manage bison. However, tribes have worked to effectively manage their wildlife resources with few financial resources but with great dedication. Their bison programs already benefit tribal members in many ways, and will benefit the millions of Americans who want Yellowstone bison restored to at least a few small areas across the plains. Rather than place unfair hurdles in their way, we suggest that we work with tribes to make this bison effort a success.

The Fort Peck and Fort Belknap wildlife agencies stand ready to help address one of our more difficult wildlife challenges. SB 144 would ruin this opportunity. That is unfair to the tribes who wish to restore an integral part of their history. It is unfair to the bison. And it is unfair to all taxpayers who have paid for this expensive Yellowstone bison quarantine effort.

For all of these reasons, Defenders of Wildlife strongly opposes this bill. We urge you to oppose Senate Bill 144. Thank you for this opportunity to comment.

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